21L.003 Reading Fiction: Imaginary Journeys
Topics for essay #1
Essay length: 2500-3000 words

Choose one of the following:

1. Explain why Odysseus feels it necessary, at the risk of his own life and the lives of his crew, to call out his name to the Cyclops Polyphemus after blinding him and escaping from his cave. Why does Lancelot seem not to care as much that people should know who he is?

2. Consider the role of the hero's ambivalence in both *Odyssey* Books 9-12 and "The Knight of the Cart." In Homer, the hero is motivated both by the desire to return home and by the desire to gain glory; in Chrétien, the hero hesitates to get into the cart because he still retains a care for his honor, even as he is devoted to the Queen. How does each work suggest that the hero's divided loyalties are to be handled or resolved?

3. Suppose you wanted to argue that Chrétien de Troyes did not really like or believe in the courtly love ideas of his patroness, Marie de Champagne. What portions of "The Knight of the Cart" could you point to as supporting this idea? Make the strongest case you can that Chrétien wanted to distance himself from the story he was telling at Marie's command. This might involve, for example, finding passages where Lancelot's devotion to the Queen could appear to cross over into the realm of parody.

4. The moment we recognize that the Kingdom of Gorre may be the underworld, "The Knight of the Cart" promises to turn from being a story about a particular knight and his lady-love to being an allegory about the triumph over death, and Lancelot's actions can be seen to parallel those of Christ (in particular, Christ's harrowing of hell and his dying to take away our sins and give us eternal life). Yet Chrétien's tale remains one of an idealized but adulterous love. How reconcilable do you find it with Christianity? What perspective would you have to take in order to be able to see it as reconcilable?

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